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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 006275

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: VISITING THE MEGA-MADRASSA OF AN ISLAMIST
BELLWETHER

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 d.

11. (C) Summary: Maulana Kamaluddin Jafri is the principal of a growing 2,000 student Saudi-backed madrassah complex. He condemns JMB violence but speculates the U.S., India, the Awami League, and an international Jewish "conspiracy" might be the JMB's true patrons. In a cordial meeting with poloff, he stated he supports Jamaat Islami politically and advocates an Islamic "middle way" of achieving power through democracy. Jafri bears watching as a bellwether for radical Islam in Bangladesh. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Maulana Kamaluddin Jafri's Jamiya Kashemia madrassah is 50 kilometers north-east of Dhaka in the town of Narsingdi. He comes from the southern coastal district of Bhola, 120 kilometers south of Dhaka, and moved to Narsingdi in the mid 1970s and founded his madrassah in 1978. He is in mid 50s, and lives on the madrassah grounds with his family. He also appears regularly on local TV, and is well regarded as an Islamist orator. At a December 4 BDG-sponsored conference of prominent Islamists, he condemned the attacks committed in the name of Islam by Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB). However, he also speculates that India, the U.S., the opposition Awami League (AL), and an international Jewish "conspiracy" might be JMB's actual patrons. "Those who have trained these militants are half-educated" in Islam, he said at the conference. "There might be Jewish involvement in these attacks."

13. (SBU) On December 18, poloff met with Jafri at his madrassah. A beaming Jafri and about 40 staff welcomed poloff as he exited his vehicle, and hoped that this would be the first of many Embassy visits. They then escorted him to an elevated reviewing stand complete with carpet and colored ropes with tassels, accompanied on one side by Maulana Jafri and on the other by a vice principal. A uniformed student, described as a boy scout, invited in his command voice poloff to review the students.

14. (SBU) Some 20 "boy scouts" on parade appeared to be in their late teens/early twenties. They stood at attention. They wore a scout-type uniform of blue shirt, dark blue short pants, white gloves, and beret with a straight up feather. The next rank of students were 18-20 teenagers clothed in white punjabis and white prayer caps, described as the "Koran recitation squad." Next came orphans boys in their early teens, and another class of equally young boys, all standing at attention as poloff passed by. Appearing more curious than serious, many smiled as poloff said "good work" as he passed by. With poloff and Jafri back at the stand, the senior boy scout commanded the 100 students in groups of five to parade in formation, which they did in an exaggerated wide swinging arm and leg style, saluting as they passed. The boy scouts, still in white gloves, then gave a short demonstration of physical calisthenics.

15. (SBU) Jafri then escorted poloff to see a few of classes, apologizing that since final exams had been given, most of classes were not in session. One that was, an English class, had about 40 students, who appeared to be in their late teens. In response to question from poloff, on the reason to learn English, many responded that English is the language of commerce and therefore important to know. Many students were from Narsingdi, although several said they came from other parts of Bangladesh. They were polite and asked poloff for tips on improving their English.

16. (SBU) The next two classes visited were on interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith. These students were also polite, curious and appeared friendly, with many seeming to understand English. They invited poloff to test their knowledge of the Koran and Hadith. Although devoid of students, Jafri showed poloff a chemistry lab that contained four workstations, two stainless steel sinks, one gas burner, and a mixed collection of beakers and flasks. The locked chemical cabinet held perhaps two dozen boxes and bottles of items such as zinc nitrate, lead nitrate and sulfuric acid. When asked about computers, Jafri said there are two computers but, as the power was out, it made no sense to see them. In response to a question on what staff thought was the most important subjects, there was mixed opinions but most replied Koranic studies, English, chemistry and engineering.

17. (SBU) In a separate building, in a large room above the

mosque, were three classes of girls in their mid-teens, all in black chadors. The classes were Islamic history, proper interpretation of the Koran, and Hadith. They understood English, responding to poloff's questions before the translation. Many were from Narsingdi. Jafri then showed poloff a new building nearing completion and already painted in pink that would be dedicated solely to girls. When asked if women's education should be equal to that of men's, Jafri readily agreed it was.

18. (SBU) A board member of the Jamiya Kashemia Trust, Abdul Haleem, who, alone among the large welcoming delegation, wore a tie, told poloff that as an aliah madrassah it gets 90 percent of its budget from the BDG and another 20 percent the Trust -- the extra 10 percent apparently funds the current expansion program. For example, there are plans to add a house for 100 girl orphans to complement the 100 boy orphanage. Their monthly budget of 400,000 taka (about USD 6100) supports 70 staff and the 40 acre complex of school buildings, mosque, offices, and the 100-boy orphanage. Among the 2,000 students, 500 live at the madrassah and pay room and board. There are 500 girls attending classes. Haleem boasted that their madrassah won first place in academic achievement among government schools.

19. (SBU) At a banquet table surrounded by staff, police, and reporters, poloff asked Jafri what he thought of the recent wave of bomb attacks throughout Bangladesh. Jafri said that the United States is a powerful country, and must be careful in its actions which affect the entire world. Problems like Palestine, he said, need to be resolved with the Palestinian people having their own state, which he said the U.S. should make happen. He went on to make an oblique criticism about U.S. actions in Iraq, and then speculated that those behind the bomb attacks in Bangladesh were the people who are the most likely to benefit from the attacks. When someone suggested India might be responsible, Jafri stated, "That comes to one's mind."

110. (SBU) When asked if it was true that he had told a conference that Jews were behind the bombings, Jafri replied, "Yes, philosophically this is true" because "the Jews must have done it or are behind it." He then asked poloff if it was true that Benjamin Franklin said to be wary of Jewish international influence. Poloff assured him this was untrue, and asked if the attacks might stem from the influence of Wahabism. Jafri demurred, saying, "There is no Wahabism, really" in Bangladesh. Over time, he continued, a number of teachings and practices have crept into Islam that are in conflict with Islam. "Shiaism, with its superstitions, is an example," and another is "shrines, which are not allowed." There is need for "purification from these practices," and this need was taught by Abd Wahab, he explained.

111. (SBU) Later in his private room, when asked about the BDG's relationship with Jamaat Islami (JI) and whether JI's relationship with JMB was damaging the government, Jafri accused the Awami League of being behind the bombings. While saying they want to institute Islamic law by killing judges who use man made law, Jafri said, in reality JMB wants the "failure of Jamaat." The JMB is "shallow in their knowledge of Islam." He described the JMB as veterans of the Afghan war who returned to Bangladesh with extreme ideas. Maybe they have some links to terrorists because of the Afghan war, but they have no connection with the Bangladesh people, are "morally weak," and cannot succeed in their goals, Jafri said.

112. (SBU) Jafri told poloff he is "not a member" of JI, but believes in its goals of coming into state power democratically. When asked, consistent with democratic ideas, if women's testimony should be the equal of a man's, he answered that "women are not equal in everything. For example, women are physically weaker than men." Thus, he said, their testimony is equal to 1/2 of a man's. Asked if it was true that a number of representatives from Middle Eastern nations had come to his madrassah Jafri said that the Saudi ambassador has visited and is "in a sense a co-founder." He insisted that his Saudi visitors share his vision of an Islamic "middle way" and are not advocates of violence.

113. (C) Comment: Although he may not officially be a JI member, Jafri has all the prejudices against Shias and Jews that are common among JI leaders. His line that JMB must be driven by non-Islamic forces who stand to benefit from the violence is also echoed, word for word, by BDG leaders like Home Minister of State Babar. His full-court charm offensive on poloff, which included a request to send English teachers to his madrassah, is also typical of Islamists who welcome Embassy contacts as a chance to "correct" USG misunderstandings about them. Jafri is apparently friendly with JI firebrand Hossain Delwar Sayadee. Given his status as an orator, a principal of major madrassah and at least an honorary affiliate of JI's hard wing, he is probably worth watching as a bellwether of "real" Islamist attitudes in

Bangladesh. Finally, his madrassah seems to be a good example that aliah madrassahs, with their broader curriculum and BDG financial support, are no guarantee against promoting the sort of extremist prejudices that are more commonly associated with qaumi madrassahs.

CHAMMAS